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Saudi Arabia: The Pivotal Kingdom

SAUDI ARABIA

The Ceaseless Quest for Security

By Nadav Safran

Harvard University Press 524 pp. \$25

By James Craig

THIS IS a very good book. It is tidy, calm, studied, erudite and scholarly. It handles a mass of material with skill and clarity. Introduced by a summary of the kingdom's history up to the death of Ibn Saud, it is thereafter in essence a year-by-year, almost a day-by-day account of Saudi foreign and defense policy in every field: the Gulf, the Yemens, Arab-Israeli, the American connection. It is, therefore, dense and detailed. Nadav Safran, director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard, relieves the detail by an admirable practice: he explains at the start of each section what he is going to say; he says it; then he summarizes what he has said. This makes for lucidity, though it does not increase the excitement. Nor does the prose style, which, though chaste and relatively free from the jargon of modern academe, is short on sparkle and elegance.

Professor Safran is particularly good on the central dilemma of Saudi foreign policy: how to reconcile the need for American support, political, military and technological, externally and perhaps also internally, with the fear of being branded as the stooge of Israel's chief ally. Here lies the principal cause of Saudi Arabia's alleged vacillation: a desire for two things which are in most circumstances incompatible. The reason why the Saudis always support Arab unity is not ideological conviction but their belief that when unity, or something approaching it, prevails, the moderates, i.e., the pro-Westerners, predominate, whereas when there is a split, the extremists drift off towards the Soviet Union and the critics of the Saudi-American connection are free to indulge their indignation, outside and inside the kingdom. For Saudi Arabia the United States is both an asset and a liability, a fact which those in Washington who say that Saudi Arabia is safe, that she has nowhere else to go, reject at their peril.

There are other reasons for Saudi hesitancy. Professor Safran accurately describes King Faisal's style: "a disposition to appease rather than resist"; "a tendency to wait for events to unfold... rather than seek to anticipate them"; "a propensity to give priority to immediate, clear demands rather than to long-term strategic considerations." Exactly.

Sir James Craig, former British ambassador to Saudi Arabia, is director general of the Middle East Association in London and visiting professor of Arabic at Oxford.



ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

King Fahd of Saudi Arabia with President Reagan in February, 1985

but as the book recognizes later, this was not only Faisal's style. It reflects national characteristics. Professor Safran argues that Saudi Arabia's position has declined since Faisal and that the reason is the quality of the (collective) leadership that followed his death. I accept neither the fact nor the reason.

The Saudis in any case cannot afford to be bold and incisive. In its endemic state of discord the Arab world has constant need of a mediator and for a number of reasons only Saudi Arabia can fill the part. She strives always, as Profes-

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sor Safran recognizes, to avoid the polarization of the Arab world. And if she were to depart from neutrality the cause would be lost.

I ENVY Professor Safran's mastery of the events of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. But at the risk of seeming hypercritical, I find his analysis too neat, too classificatory: there were four reasons for this; five phases in that. He attributes to the Saudis a diplomacy too clever, too calculated to be credible. Even in countries with a long tradition of diplomacy it is hard to believe in a constant foreign policy except as a pattern detected so to speak posthumously by historians out of a series of accidents and reactions. In the case of the Saudis, neither the experience nor, more important, the apparatus of diplomacy has been available. Take this account for example:

"The Saudis promptly took advantage of the new situation to reach towards Iraq and to maneuver between it and Iran to protect their security and other interests in the region against the threats they had previously faced from both quarters. Specifically they endeavored to use Iraq to frustrate the Shah's schemes to institutionalize his hegemonic aspirations through a Gulf collective defense pact; and to use Iran to check Iraq's aspirations to become the center of an alignment of the Arab countries of the Gulf. They also strove to play on the rival aspirations of the two powers in order to restrict the position of either one among the Gulf emirates and to assert their own predominance there. Within two years of Faisal's death they had succeeded remarkably in both endeavors, so that in 1977 they seemed to be in control of their destiny in the Gulf, even as they were at the same moment masters of the situation in the Arab-Israeli arena, in their relations with the United States, in their dealings with the Yemens, and elsewhere." Good heavens, was Metternich still alive in the Gulf in 1977? Was King Khaled the Talleyrand *de nos jours*?

Equally, when the author is critical of Saudi policy, he criticizes from the standpoint of one who expects too much. "By the end of Khaled's reign Saudi policy was virtually enthralled to Syria." The adjective, repeated later, is absurdly exaggerated, but it reflects the common criticism that the Saudis have not done enough to moderate Syrian intransigence. But what can they do? What tools of diplomacy do

they have? Only money; and the ineffectiveness of money as a means of controlling another country's policy is continually demonstrated in the relationship between the United States and Israel. The purse-strings may modify methods and tactics; they can seldom change principles and policies.

Professor Safran has little to say about the modish subject of internal security: Will Saudi Arabia go the way of Iran? If he had said more, I should have expected to disagree with him; for he speaks of "vast economic and social change" and "social and economic changes at a dizzying pace" (my emphasis). But for me the great surprise in Saudi Arabia is that the admittedly vast economic expansion has been accompanied by a comparatively tiny amount of change in social practices and values: a factor which helps to explain, while being itself inexplicable, the stability which prevails in Saudi Arabia amid a sea of regional turmoil.

Professor Safran's final, though tentative, conclusion is that "America's long-term aim should be to disengage its vital interests from the policy and fate of the Kingdom." I advise caution: the present regime has many faults but no possible successor could be as helpful to American and Western interests.

A final point: the circle which makes the big decisions in Saudi Arabia is a closed community. Neither Professor Safran nor I, nor anyone outside the circle, knows who says what in the debate, or why, or who carries weight. The press cannot help at all, and the dispatches of ambassadors very little. Any discussion, therefore, of the formation of high Saudi policy is bound to be largely guesswork. Professor Safran is an expert and his guesswork is perceptive and usually persuasive. But when he says, for example, that the Khaled-Abdullah faction advocated this and Fahd insisted on that, he remains in the field of conjecture.

It has been alleged that this book has been financed by the CIA. I have no idea whether the allegation is true or not. But if it is, there has been no effect on the argument, which is balanced and scholarly and will serve no propaganda purpose for any of the parties conceivably interested. If I have labored my disagreement with parts of the argument, that is a measure of the profound respect with which I have emerged from a study of the book.